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## MISSIONARY BIOGRAPHY IN THE SUNDAY SCHOOL<sup>1</sup>

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Although the Bible must ever remain the textbook norm for Sunday-school instruction, it is quite generally recognized that, in the form in which we have it, it is not a children's book. Those who wrote it did not have in mind an audience of children. If the narratives which constitute the most usable Sunday-school material are to be brought within the range of children's appreciation they need to be retold, not perhaps in simpler language, although this will sometimes be helpful, but with much additional detail drawn from the customs and conditions of Bible times, in order that vivid and concrete pictures may provide for the child the suggestion and setting for the needful moralizations. Large sections of the Bible are almost never given to children to read. A study of all the portions used from the time of the introduction of the International Uniform Lesson System from the year 1873 to the year 1905 shows that during these thirty-three years the committee did not see fit to draw upon more than one-fourth of the Bible for lesson material. Even in Sunday schools which have adopted independent graded lessons, it is a question whether a much greater fraction of the Bible is being studied by children below the adolescent age. By instinct and training Sunday-school workers generally feel, with Dr. G. Stanley Hall, that "what may be regarded as the Sunday-school parts of the Bible are mainly narratives," and discriminations need to be made even among these.

Thus the children's Bible is a very small book. The amount of biblical material given the average Sunday-school child for one week's lesson can be easily read in two minutes. For an entire year he is assigned the equivalent of about thirty ordinary-sized pages—an amount which a child of twelve would be glad to read in one

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the article, "The Material of Religious Education," by Professor W. G. Ballantine, D.D., *Biblical World*, February, 1906.

afternoon, were it in form and content interesting to him. Sunday-school workers, feeling that the amount of biblical material given a child for a lesson is far too brief to hold his attention for a lesson period, have supplemented it by three or four times as much other reading. This material takes the form, for the most part, of explanations of Bible customs, of comments on obscure passages, of disconnected anecdotes or illustrations, and "preaching."

Let it be freely granted that the commentary which aids the child to read between the lines of the Bible narrative, and to see clearly the picture suggested, is most necessary. Yet the question may be fairly put: Is an attempt to master a multitude of disconnected illustrations and moralizations the best use of Sunday-school time and the most effective method of reaching the desired end? Further, instead of labored attempts to bring to the understanding of children a larger portion of the Bible than is clearly adapted to them, would it not be better to give them other books to read and study which in essence are children's commentaries on the great truths of which the Bible is the storehouse? Not all the masterpieces of English prose or poetry are fitted to the child-mind, and every well-built day-school curriculum recognizes the fact. Nor do the children, when they come to riper years, show less appreciation of these masterpieces because of a somewhat delayed acquaintance with them. May it not be that kinds of religious literature may be found which will prove to be a more rationally educative approach for children to religious truth than even some parts of that limited portion of revelation that we have called the child's Bible? If such books are already in existence, or in the future may be written, it is evident, that, on the one hand, they should appeal to the normal interests of children, and, on the other, that their subject-matter should be in harmony with the aim of the Sunday-school.

Of late years a half-dozen or more studies of children's interests have been made by students in education. Two of the most suggestive for our present inquiry will be quoted.

"Children's Interests in the Reading Work of the Elementary Schools" were studied by Mr. Clark Wissler, director of the Psychological Laboratory of the Ohio State University. After questioning several thousand public-school children in order to learn what lessons

in their school readers they remembered and liked best, he secured data which, in condensed form, are as follows:

(1) All the lessons remembered to any extent, except a few remembered for their oddities, are in terms of experience the child can realize in himself. (2) The lessons remembered most are especially natural and lifelike. (3) The lessons not remembered by any child are too short to excite interest, or do not treat of things a child can appreciate. (4) The mere instructive lesson, the moral and its setting; abstract poems concerning duty, happiness, love of nature, etc., make up the bulk of those remembered by 5 per cent or less.<sup>2</sup>

Mr. George E. Dawson, fellow in psychology at Clark University, made a study of "Children's Interests in the Bible." He gathered information showing the preferences of one thousand children living in different parts of the country. Having differentiated between the preferences of children of different ages, Mr. Dawson says:

At all ages children feel more interest in persons than in any other elements of the Bible. Even scenes and stories appeal to them mainly through the man, woman, or child that is the center of the scene or the principal actor in the story. This suggests that the Bible be given to children of all ages, through its personal element.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. G. Stanley Hall, in writing of the preference of children before adolescence for Old Testament stories rather than those in the New Testament, says:

Children of this age lead a life eminently objective; they look outward, and should not be encouraged to look inward. They love exciting events, battles, the flood and tower. They admire character; for this is an age of intense hero-worship, and interest in persons is necessary to animate interest in causes, ideas, all geographical localities, ceremonials, etc.

In one of the late and most praiseworthy books on child study, Mr. Kirkpatrick has said: "Various studies of children's reading indicated that they are interested, in the earlier grades, in animals and children rather than in adults." The adolescent period he emphasizes as a time pre-eminently of hero-worship:

This is the age of idealistic imitation and ideals. Ambitions and ideals are no longer dependent on the immediate environment, but the most beautiful, noble, and high are chosen from the world of history, literature, and art. In the earlier stage of this wider life the most attractive ideals are frequently crude. Boys are most appealed to by action, power, and courage; hence not merely history, but all kinds of stories of adventure, in which marvels of skill and bravery are shown, are their delight.

<sup>2</sup> *Pedagogical Seminary*, April, 1898, pp. 522-40.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. VII, p. 151.

With girls there is something of the same attraction toward the strange and wonderful, but the more passive virtues of love and devotion under trying circumstances are most interesting.

The testimonies of those who are doing the practical work of teaching agree, in the main, with those of students of children's problems. In Germany, where it is commonly conceded that history has been taught with great success, during the first two years of history instruction, when the children are nine and ten years of age, they are given simple stories almost exclusively biographical in form, which cover roughly the whole range of general history. The next four years, until the children are about fifteen, are devoted to a second survey of general history. The material is still given in the narrative form, but there is a closer sequence in events, and larger ideas concerning the state are introduced. In the report of the New England History Teachers' Association for 1899 the Committee on Courses of Study recommends that the first cycle of historical study in the elementary school, for children of the second through the fifth grades, consist of Grecian, Roman, and Norse myths, and stories and biographies from Hebrew, Grecian, Roman, European, English, and American history. In the second cycle, for children from the sixth through the ninth grades, biographies are again suggested, and the same field is covered in a more thorough manner, textbooks being used for the first time. We quote the words of the Committee:

The work in biography which we strongly recommend chiefly in Course I, and in considerable measure in Course II, should include the lives of inventors and captains of industry, educators and statesmen, as well as military heroes.

A so-called "partial" or "suggestive" list of fifty-seven names for biographical study is appended to the report.<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Mary Sheldon Barnes, from a study of "The Development of the Historical Sense of Children," drew these four conclusions:

(1) History is a proper subject for children from the age of seven. (2) Time is badly understood until twelve or thirteen. (3) History should first interest itself with the biographies of heroic characters. (4) These biographies should be of men who fight, hunt, and build, rather than of those who write, or think, or legislate.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> New England History Teachers' Association, *Reports*, 1897-1900, pp. 22-25.

<sup>5</sup> *Pedagogical Seminary*, April, 1898, p. 498, by J. S. Taylor.

In the report of the Committee of Fifteen for 1893 is found this statement:

The child loves to approach the stern realities of a firmly established civilization through its stages of growth by means of individual enterprise. Here is the use of biography as introductory to history. It treats of exceptional individuals whose lives bring them in one way or another into world-wide relations.

Dr. Charles McMurry, in writing of history in the elementary school, speaks of the value of biography as a source from which unselfishness springs. He says:

The study of biography is social in its effect, because it takes the child out of himself and loses him in the life and experience of another. The more biographies of the right sort a child studies appreciatively, the more his own life is expanded to encompass and identify itself with the lives of others.<sup>6</sup>

In the course of study which he recommends the prominence of biographies of typical and great men, even through the eighth grade, is very marked.

Regarding these quotations as samples of the judgment of men who have studied the problem of children's interests, and making inferences from the practice of the best modern day schools, we may perhaps safely give the following general statements concerning the essential characteristics of literature interesting to children:

1. Such literature is almost invariably in the narrative form.
2. The narrative is of sufficient length to make more than a mere passing impression upon the child's mind. The old-fashioned reader containing many short stories is being replaced, to a large extent, by readers containing but one story each. A long narrative, requiring a series of lessons for its study, presents the cumulative impression of a series of scenes and actions all of which vivify the book's great central theme or moral.
3. Literature interesting to children of all ages is saturated with much concrete and picturesque detail. In both history and geography the modern tendency is to study thoroughly a few concrete types, rather than to gain a large mass of general ideas without the concrete pictures in the child's mind as a basis for possible independent deductions.
4. Literature pleasing to children is radiant with the personal element. History, in all the grammar grades where it is taught,

<sup>6</sup> Charles McMurry, *Special Method in History*, 1903, p. 9.

is made interesting through stories of the great men and women who played their parts in it.

5. Biographies for children present men and women of action whose work is among primitive peoples or where civilization is simple. They are the stories of men whose lives are filled with adventure and courage, and whose virtues are molded in the large.

Are there books, then, embodying these characteristics of literature adapted for children's reading and, at the same time, so saturated with the Christlike spirit and activity that they will aid the Sunday school in accomplishing its aim? We would not claim that this article suggests the only answer to this question; yet we believe that in the biographies of the church's great pioneer workers among primitive peoples we may find perhaps the greatest help in the solution of the problem.

Taking the life of John G. Paton, missionary to the New Hebrides, as an example of others, let us note how his biography meets the requirements suggested. It is a book full of outdoor activity and picturesque detail. Although not bulky, the story, as told for young people, is six times as long as the longest gospel narrative of the life of Christ. It is teeming with thrilling adventures, the most marked courage, and "love and devotion under trying circumstances." Little wonder is it that in city public libraries the boys and girls are constantly calling for Mr. Paton's book. What more effective commentary than the story of his life could be found on Jesus' promise, "Lo, I am with you alway even unto the end of the world?" Or how better could we make real to a boy the meaning of the Christlike life of self-forgetting service? Who would dare to say that three months consumed by a Sunday-school class in studying merely the autobiography of this one man had been mis-spent if either one of these great Christian truths were made to live for the children?

Other lives, not so well known perhaps as that of Mr. Paton, if rewritten from the children's point of view, might be equally fascinating to boys and girls, as well as productive of religious results. Let children have a fair opportunity to become acquainted with James Gilmour working alone among the nomad Buddhists of Mongolia. Let them go with him on his twenty-three-mile walk through the desert of Mongolia, with feet swollen and bleeding, in

order to make possible a personal conversation alone with the first Mongol who had shown a desire to be a Christian, and they will begin to see what it means to love another into the kingdom of God. Should you wish to teach how the gospel is able to transform the lives of men, why not study the lives of some of the converts on the mission fields? Why not teach children the doctrine of faith and works through the life of Alexander Mackay of Uganda, who, through the things he made with his hands, was continually showing the African king the meaning of the gospel? Or who would think of omitting, for the boys and girls of fifteen or sixteen, the life of David Livingstone, that man of statesmanlike plans for the kingdom of God, combined with a childlike faith and utter unselfishness? Such examples might be multiplied. Since the very spread of Christianity itself has furnished us with these great heroes of faith, why should we grudge the use even of months of Sunday-school time in studying their lives? Through such instruction, in very truth, one is teaching the life of Christ.

That missionary literature, especially missionary biography, is a real interpreter of the Bible is believed by not a few prominent Christian workers. Mr. Samuel B. Capen, president of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, in an address before a conference of Congregational Sunday-school superintendents in Boston, said:

When Luke finished the Acts of the Apostles, the story was not complete. There have been acts of other men of God through the centuries worthy in every way to have a place in our study. When the writer of the book of Hebrews in his eleventh chapter gave a list of the worthies and laid down his pen, he certainly did not complete the list. There have been thousands of men since who have been far more worthy a place in such a list than some of those contained in that chapter.<sup>7</sup>

In a report of the Church Missionary Society of Great Britain for 1891 occurs this statement:

It may be that a child's first desire after true religion may, through the grace of the Holy Ghost, be awakened by what he hears of true religion in the heart of the negro or the red Indian. In ordinary Christian teaching what anecdotes or illustrations can be found more appropriate and telling than those furnished by missionary annals? Africa, India, China, can supply narratives of godly

<sup>7</sup> *The Sunday School Offering*, 1903, pp. 36-38.



boys and girls far more truly interesting than the imaginary "good little boy whose name was Willie," who figures so often in religious teaching.<sup>8</sup>

Rev. Charles L. Rhoades, D.D., district secretary of the American Baptist Missionary Union, has said:

What is the geography of the Sunday School? The land of Palestine and the travels of St. Paul. What are the maps in your Bible; i. e., what is your kingdom? The map of Palestine, and the travels of St. Paul, and the wanderings of the children of Israel; and, by these maps, you expect to educate Christian citizens to a knowledge of the kingdom of God. They are to take the place of the cradle of Jesus Christ, and call a knowledge of that in its geography a knowledge of the kingdom of God. When I was little, I had the idea that Bible characters were in some way differentiated from us. They were characters that were portrayed in an inspired book, and to my mind they were different from the boys and girls of today. I never knew Paul till I knew Judson; I never knew Peter, and Isaiah, and the leading men of God's Word till I knew Moffat, and Livingstone, and Paton, and Morton, and Carey.

In other words, the story of missions in the characters produced and the work brought forth has been to me the greatest interpreter of God's Word.

Rev. E. Morris Fergusson, general secretary of the New Jersey Sunday School Association, says:

The one thing I hear from boys and men is: "Oh, we have had these lessons over and over again!" One boy said to me: "Do not misunderstand me; I love my Bible and I love my Savior; I love my God; why don't they teach us something that is going on today?" I have said a thousand times, I wish that my boy would get an idea of what God is doing in China, rather than what he did with Nebuchadnezzar thousands of years ago. We are constantly talking about what he did in Egypt, but say nothing of what he is doing in Japan, China, and the South Sea Islands.<sup>9</sup>

Such declarations are strong. Indeed, we venture to say that more emphatic testimony could not be given concerning the value of any other extra-biblical material. Yet we have even more than the theoretical statements of Christian workers. The keenest test which can be made of the interest aroused by a story is found in the activity which the narrative stimulates. The deeper the impression, the greater the expression. Missionary biographies have completely transformed the life-purpose and work of hundreds of men and women. It was the stories of missionary heroism which his mother told him, and the map of Africa on which his father

<sup>8</sup> *Hints on Juvenile and Sunday School Work.*

<sup>9</sup> "Young People and Missions," *Report of the First Conference of Sunday School and Young People's Leaders in Mission Work*, 1903, p. 106.

traced the journeys of Livingstone then in progress, that fired the soul of Alexander Mackay so that he gave his life for Africa. William Carey, on his shoemaker's bench, read the story of David Brainerd in the woods of North America, and he was led to ask: "If God can do such things for the Indians of America, why not for the pagans of India?" And he went to Calcutta to make the test. The same biography sent Henry Martyn to India, and Samuel Marsden to do his great work in New Zealand. Miss Eliza Agnew, who became "the mother of a thousand daughters" in Ceylon, formed her missionary purpose when but eight years old. It was because of a geography lesson. The Isle of France was pointed out on the map, and the story told of Miss Harriet Newell whose grave is on the island.

Further, it should be noted that the lives of such men and women are to be presented as types of hundreds of others who today are devoting themselves to the kingdom. The study of these biographies is to be introductory to the study in later years of the history of the progress of the kingdom of God, both at home and abroad. The work of these heroes is typical of forms of present-day activity, and their problems are examples of modern problems that children may begin to help to solve. The missionary work of the church is its largest and most difficult present-day task.

Missionary biographies, if rightly taught, will suggest to the children kinds of service which they can render in their own homes, for their neighbors, and for the sick and lonely in hospitals and charitable institutions, and in gifts for missions through which the children will be working even at the very ends of the earth. And we should not overlook wholly the possibilities for the future which are involved in the missionary education of children. Although, according to the trend of thought in modern education, it is not safe to teach a child merely that which is going to help him in after-life, nevertheless, by meeting his present needs and by feeding his present interests, we are making the best preparation for the future. If the interest aroused and maintained is genuine, and the activities engaged in are but the natural expression of that interest, in the future, when larger kinds of service are possible, the pupils naturally will devote their energies to service of wider significance.